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FROM THE AMERICAN PEOPLE

Theater Empowers Afro- Honduran Women in HIV Battle

By Samantha Croasdaile

COROZAL, Honduras—Yilian David and Nanigui* are no ordinary Garifuna women.

At first glance, they appear to fit traditional homemaker roles— cleaning house, cooking meals, and watching children. But David and Nanigui are much more than that. They are members of a new group of female leaders who are powerful voices in their communities for HIV prevention.



Yillian David durante una presentación

USAID has worked to prevent HIV/AIDS in Garifuna communities for 12 years, and in the last five has helped create community theater groups to spread HIV/AIDS-prevention messages throughout the north coast of Honduras. Participants studied acting as well as scriptwriting. Now they act in a series of performances—including three radio soap operas containing HIV-prevention messages targeted at youth. While successfully raising awareness about HIV/AIDS prevention, the theater groups also give community members, especially women, an opportunity to discuss HIV/AIDS prevention in a more comfortable setting.

In 12 years, not only has the HIV/AIDS incidence in the Garifuna population declined from 8.4 percent to 4.5 percent, but HIV/AIDS awareness has become a platform for developing women's leadership. "I became part of the theater group when I was very young," David said. "The program taught me not to sit with my arms crossed waiting for something better to come along, but rather to go out there and make it happen.

"The Garifuna have a strong oral tradition, so theater is a great way to get information out to people. In the last few years, we've used theater to deal with other issues as well, like environmental problems and keeping kids in school and away from drugs." David

has won several national theater awards. She's a celebrity among the Garifuna. As a widely recognized role model in the community, David fully understands the importance of positively influencing and inspiring others.

"I have a lot of responsibility because people are constantly judging what I do," said David. "I believe that people know they can make a difference because I have shown them they can." Since she began participating in community theater, David graduated high school and received a vocational degree. She still volunteers in her community by spreading HIV/AIDS-prevention messages, organizing community development groups, and using theater to address other important social and political issues.

Nanigui also lives in David's community. She is a stay-at-home wife, mother, and grandmother, who has been married to her husband for 33 years. Her roles shifted when she decided to attend a theater performance dealing with HIV/AIDS. That first performance changed her life. "Through the HIV/AIDS program, I met women my age who were just like me, but I also met other women who had dared to be different and voice their opinions in their communities. I chose to be a woman who voices her opinion," she says.

Knowing that her husband had another partner, Nanigui took action. She said: "I know that for Garifuna men, having more than one sexual partner is traditional, but he was putting my life at risk. I got tested for HIV/AIDS, and my result was negative. I told my husband that I would stay in the relationship only if we always have protected sex. My husband agreed."

In a community where speaking about sex is taboo, Nanigui openly talks to youth groups about her life decisions. "When I speak to young people about my choices, their first reaction is disbelief. Here is a grandmother telling them to protect themselves and practice safe sex. It's a big shock for them, but at the end of my story, many come to talk to me and ask for advice."

In 1986, USAID officially began implementing groundbreaking HIV/AIDS programs in the developing world just two years after HIV, the virus that causes AIDS, was isolated and identified. More than 20 years later, the Agency has programs in nearly 100 countries, and works in partnership with the U.S. President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief, an initiative announced in 2003 to stem the growing epidemic of HIV/AIDS. It is the largest such program in the world, providing HIV/AIDS prevention, care, and treatment.

In Garifuna communities, USAID works with over 200,000 people, teaching them behaviors that reduce the risk of infection. It is currently opening new theater groups and working with schools to spread prevention messages among youth. .

*Name changed for privacy reasons.

